

Jill Remick Comments on H1N1 at Vermont Principals Association Conference

Good evening. My name is Jill Remick and I am the communications director at the Vermont Department of Education. Ken Page invited me to come before you tonight to give you a brief update on the H1N1 flu pandemic, and how specifically it may affect Vermont's schools. As part of my role at the DOE, I participated in a Flu Summit in Washington DC last month where I heard directly from Education Secretary Arne Duncan and Health and Human Services Secretary Kathleen Sebelius on how to best prepare schools for the anticipated resurgence this fall. I also meet regularly with the Vermont Department of Health specifically to ensure that you all will get the information you need, and I met with the Vermont School Crisis Planning Team which includes current and former administrators and folks from Emergency Management. Any information I am sharing with you tonight I got from the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services or the Vermont Department of Health.

But I want to get right to the key messages I want to be sure you take with you tonight:

- **Prepare to be surprised** – Right now, the severity of H1N1 is no worse than seasonal flu, but it could change and therefore could change the recommended courses of action. Schools should organize local planning teams, with school nurses playing a key role. School nurses are the front lines of this, and need your support.
- **Keep kids safe, keep them learning** – Arne Duncan told us this. School-aged students are being disproportionately affected, and are therefore a priority group for the control of H1N1 and vaccination campaigns. However, guidance now is that school closure should be a last resort. More on that in a minute.
- **Promote Healthy Habits** – Encourage and teach habits to keep germs from spreading (cover cough, wash hands, stay away from others when sick, etc.). Healthy hand washing needs to be a part of school culture. For your School Custodians: There is NO special disinfection cleaning procedure beyond routine cleaning.
- **Keep Sick People Out of Schools** – Parents, students, and staff have a responsibility to keep themselves and their sick children at home. This is the best way to stop the spread of the virus. Make it clear you expect sick kids and staff to stay home or else they will be sent home.
- **Stay Tuned** – The Health Department is expecting specific guidance from the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) this Friday, August 7. We do expect it to resurge in the fall when students are back in school. This guidance will be emailed to you, superintendents and your school nurses, and of course can also be found on the CDC Web site.

Regarding School Closure

The goal will be to keep schools open and minimize transmission in the schools by emphasizing the points above. School closing has only limited effectiveness in slowing disease transmission, but presents major difficulties to communities. If the severity of the novel flu strain stays the same, guidance will emphasize taking the steps above and keeping schools open.

As in a normal flu year, schools may occasionally close for practical reasons such as high teacher absenteeism. This fall, federal authorities will recommend early closures only under "extenuating circumstances," such as if a school has many children with underlying medical conditions. The decision to close will be made by the local administration in consultation with the Health Department.

However, now is the time to review plans for dismissing students from school, which could happen for short periods with high absenteeism or for longer periods if a more severe strain emerges. Plan for continuity of learning, and how the school can still be used even if classes are dismissed. We at the department are exploring ways we can use the current channels with your teachers, such as wikis and Sharepoint, to share curricula, and Vermont Public Television has some educational programming we could take advantage of.

Regarding the Vaccine

The federal government is taking action to develop a safe and effective vaccine to protect against the H1N1 flu virus. If all goes well, some limited amounts of vaccine may be available to states sometime this fall. All states are now in the process of planning for the possibility of offering vaccinations to priority groups, including students in schools. Schools may very well make ideal staging areas for administering the vaccine to the priority group of school-aged children. Please remember and pass along that the vaccination for this or any flu is voluntary, NOT mandatory.

It is expected that both novel H1N1 and seasonal flu strains will circulate at the same time during our upcoming flu season. That's why the Department of Health is encouraging everyone who is eligible to get a seasonal flu shot as soon as it's available, and then the novel H1N1 flu vaccination if available. Initial vaccination efforts will focus on five key populations:

1. all people 6 months through 24 years of age
2. people who live with or care for children younger than 6 months of age
3. all pregnant women
4. healthcare and emergency services personnel, and
5. people aged 25 through 64 years who have health conditions associated with higher risk of medical complications from influenza.

Coming Up

Information will continue to change as the situation worldwide and in our state changes, but the Departments of Health, Education, and Public Safety here in Vermont are committed to keeping our stakeholders up to date with regular communication. I am working collaboratively with the Department of Health so that we can ensure that school administrators get the information they need, often simultaneously with your school nurse and school health liaisons.

Here are some things for you to watch for in your inbox in the next few weeks:

1. An Information letter from Education Commissioner Armando Vilaseca and Health Commissioner Wendy Davis, including a checklist for schools on what can be done now.
2. CDC guidance on Friday or Monday – the Health Department will be sending the latest guidance from CDC to school nurses and administrators once they have those.
3. The Vermont School Crisis Guide has an Influenza checklist already, and we are working on an H1N1-specific piece.
4. The Vermont School Crisis Team is considering offering brief tabletop exercises for schools to participate in so they can consider who could make up their school crisis team and how this would be executed in the event of an outbreak.

I would like to leave you with a quick example from the Health Department: During this past spring's outbreak in Vermont, a Williston second grade teacher was out sick with flu-like symptoms for the last two days of school this year. Staying home was a difficult decision for her because she was determined to say goodbye to her students. She had instructed these students for two straight years, and she did everything possible to find a way to come in to school. She

contacted the principal and the school nurse and the Health Department and - for most of that morning - resisted advice to "please stay home." She was looking for a way to come in. Maybe for 30 minutes. Maybe for 15 minutes. Three weeks later, fully recovered from her illness, she helped organize a pool party for her students and formally had a chance to say goodbye to her students.

This is typical of how following basic, commonsense practices, such as staying home when you are sick, can be a hard, uncomfortable choice to make. But it is the right decision. It's something we collectively have to do to prevent the possible spread of flu in the fall.

Resources:

As I mentioned earlier, on Friday, August 7, the CDC is coming out with very specific guidance regarding schools and H1N1. This information can be found at flu.gov.

1. Flu.gov
2. Healthvermont.gov